Ethnography

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1 Introduction

This supplement expands the introduction to ethnography in Chapter 6. Along with additional details of how to carry out an ethnographic study it offers an overview of the design’s strengths and weaknesses, along with additional references for further study.

Ethnography involves an in-depth field investigation through which the researcher seeks to describe and interpret ‘the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and language of a culture-sharing group’ (Creswell 2009: 68). Typically this is done by the researcher acting as a participant-observer in the situation under study, sometimes for a prolonged period of time. The origins of ethnography lie within anthropological studies and can be traced back over a century. Ethnography has since developed and diversified and as a result, the term defies easy definition. We can, however, identify a number of characteristics of an ethnographic study in terms of what ethnographers do (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007):

- People’s actions and interactions are studied in the field, in their natural settings as they go about their daily activities rather than in an artificial environment.
- Emphasis is placed on participant-observation and/or informal conversations at first hand, by the researcher, although other data collection methods may be used as well. One consequence of this is that ethnographic studies can be long-term, with field research taking place over months or even years.
Field methods are relatively unstructured and have a flexible character, developing as the research proceeds.

Research is usually focused on a small number of cases, sometimes a single group or setting, to facilitate in-depth study.

Analysis is inductive in the sense that conceptual frameworks are generated from the data analysis rather than being imposed on the data by the researcher. In other words, ethnographers typically take an emic perspective in their research.

The output of an ethnographic study traditionally involves what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975: 6) famously labelled ‘thick’ description. As we pointed out in Chapter 5, this is more than just a very detailed description. Developing a thick description involves moving beyond reporting simply what is observed to interpreting the meaning, motivation and understanding involved in what is seen and how these are related to the context (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Thus, to use Geertz’s example introduced in Chapter 5, suppose that you saw two boys each rapidly close one eye. To describe what you observed in terms of the physical action of eye closing is to give a ‘thin’ description. But what is actually going on in this situation? Perhaps the boys are winking at each other as a signal to get ready to do something or perhaps they are sharing a secret joke. To describe what is happening in those terms is to offer a thick description of what has been observed. There is an enormous difference between thin description of the physical action and the thick description of the act of winking because winking is a form of communication and counts as such because of a ‘socially established code’ (Geertz 1975: 6) that both the boys understand and share. Such a move from thin to thick description is, in Geertz’s view, the object of ethnography.

2 Applications of ethnography

The most obviously relevant application of ethnographic research in business and management is in the area of organisational ethnography. As Eriksson and Kovalainen describe them:

‘Organisational ethnographies provide in-depth descriptions of a wide range of topics within the field of management and organisations, such as managerial action, organisational cultures, human resource practices, interaction of professional groups, work behaviour and co-worker relations, emotional labour, and sexual harassment’
Within this very broad body of work, it is possible to identify three distinct categories (Brewer 2004). The first category includes research that focuses on occupational careers and identities. Studies have included such diverse subjects as police officers, factory workers and nightclub hostesses. One example among many is Delbridge’s (1998) study of worker experience of the ‘Japanese model’ of production management. The second category of organisational ethnography explores control in organisations. A classic work in this tradition is Roy’s (1952) research on the range of informal mechanisms used by machine-shop workers to control output. Control is also the subject of researchers engaging in critical ethnography where the focus is on understanding power in organisations or other social situations (Creswell 2009). The third category of organisational ethnography addresses ‘the practical reasoning skills of people coping at the bottom of bureaucracies’ (Brewer 2004: 314). Studies in this area have highlighted both the routine nature of much professional work and the skilled coping strategies employed by workers in routine jobs.

Whilst the topics of organisational ethnography may appear at first glance as of primarily academic interest, Brewer (2000) argues for the practical value of ethnography. Potential applications include the investigation of the views and understandings of those affected by policy changes, including those who are seen as part of the supposed problem the policy change is proposing to address. Applied ethnographic studies can also be used to complement the findings of quantitative research on the grounds that ‘qualitative methods can get to the parts of some policy problems that quantitative ones cannot reach and vice versa’ (Walker, quoted in Brewer 2000: 164). Ethnography is also used in market research and advocates claim that ethnography can be used to understand customers and markets more fully in order to inform marketing strategy (Arnould and Price 2006). In contrast to interview or survey-based market research, market researchers using ethnography seek to study product or service use in its natural context:

‘Our goal is to see people’s behaviour on their terms, not ours. While this observational method may appear inefficient, it enlightens us about the context in which customers would use a new product and the meaning that product might hold in their lives’

Anderson (2009).
A more recent development is the use of ethnographic methods to gain an in-depth understanding of online communities. This is known variously as netnography, virtual ethnography, online ethnography or even webethnography (Prior and Miller 2012). The diversity of online communities means that there is considerable scope for such research to explore topics from online gaming to healthcare. Marketing and market researchers have also seen the potential offered by online ethnography. Kozinets (2002: 70), for example, argues that netnography can be a valuable method for studying the ‘language, motivations, consumption linkages, and symbols of consumption-oriented online communities’.

3 Outline of the design

An ethnographic study is a qualitative research design with an inductive orientation that is characterised by field research in which observation plays an important role. Far from being fixed and pre-determined in advance, the actual methods used in a particular study are contingent and have to respond to the situation that confronts the researcher. To reflect the developmental nature of ethnographic research our depiction of the key steps in an ethnographic study in Figure 1 has been kept quite general.

Figure 1 – Steps in an ethnographic study

The emergent character of an ethnographic study is underlined by how the research questions are formulated. As we explained in Chapter 2, research questions in some qualitative research are progressively refined during the project rather than fixed at the start. This is common in
ethnography and we have used the term ‘preliminary research problem’ rather than research question in Figure 1 to reflect that. Nevertheless as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 24) stress, such initial problems need to be worked up into a ‘worthwhile and viable form’ and be turned into a ‘set of questions to which an answer could be given’ prior to fieldwork. This process can be supported by reference to relevant literature although in line with an inductive orientation this is unlikely to be taken to the point of developing a formal theory for testing. Your research questions may be subject to further refinement once fieldwork is under way although it is still important to focus the topic to help make sense of the vast amount of data that field research throws up (Silverman 2010).

Next you will have to select a suitable research site. In applied ethnographic research your choice of setting may already be pre-determined but in other situations you will need to identify a specific site or the particular group to study. You must also decide whether researching a single site is sufficient. For practical reasons of time and access, along with the desire for in-depth fieldwork, you may opt for a single setting particularly for a small student project or in applied research when a particular organisation is the focus of interest. Selection does not end with choosing the research site, however. You will also need to think about sampling within the setting. You will need to decide what, where and when to observe and who to talk to (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). It will hardly be possible to include everything so this is also an important part of the sampling process. Given the developmental nature of ethnography, your sampling strategy is also likely to develop over time in response to emergent findings. Schouten and McAlexander (1995), for example, in their ethnographic study of Harley-Davidson bikers report how their sample of sites and informants broadened as new categories of bikers were identified (see Research in Practice).

Site selection also involves ensuring that you have the right level of access. This can be a challenge in ethnographic research. Firstly, access is required not just to the site but also to the activities and to the people involved in those activities, perhaps in difficult or sensitive situations. Secondly, access is likely to be needed for a prolonged period so it is important to be able to maintain it throughout your fieldwork. Thirdly, access may involve particular ethical challenges, as we discuss later.

The practical difficulties of gaining access mean that you may need to identify an appropriate ‘gatekeeper’ to help you. In formal organisational settings the gatekeeper is likely to be someone such as a senior manager who can grant official permission for access. In informal
situations, any gatekeeper role is likely to be unofficial, such as a local opinion leader, but nevertheless obtaining their support can be essential. Some studies may involve multiple gatekeepers, both official and unofficial, and at different levels, all of whom may be needed to provide some level of endorsement to your research activity. It is not surprising that access looms large in both textbook and field accounts of ethnographic work.

Once you have gained access, fieldwork can get under way. We have deliberately chosen not to separate data collection and data analysis at this stage since they often proceed in parallel. Data collection can make use of multiple sources, as Hammersley and Atkinson describe:

‘In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry’

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 3)

As we have noted, observation forms a key part of the data collection effort for most ethnographies. It can usefully be described along two dimensions. The first dimension is the extent to which the researcher is actually taking part in what is going on or merely observing, in other words whether acting as a participant-observer or not. Participation may allow the researcher to get closer to what is going on but runs a greater risk of ‘over identification’ with the setting and of losing ‘intellectual distance’ and a ‘critical analytic perspective’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 90). The second dimension is whether the observation is to be covert or overt. In an ethnographic study covertness is likely to take the form of the researcher not declaring that they are engaged in research rather than in physically concealing the act of observation. A number of arguments can be advanced for keeping the research covert. One is that it makes it easier to get access. Another is that it reduces disruption to the research setting. A third is that it allows the researcher to adopt the participant role more credibly. Concealing that you are carrying out research, however, is clearly a form of deception and raises important ethical questions as we discussed in Chapter 8.

You will also need to consider how you will capture the data while you are in the field. Audio and video recording can be used along with photography if appropriate, but field notes are
the traditional method. Field notes can be used to capture not just what has happened but also to record your emerging thoughts on the research. Collection and analysis thereby proceed in parallel, although it is always important to be able to distinguish between your own analysis and the record of what has been said or observed. Finally, at some point, the fieldwork stage will come to end and you will need to leave the field. This may seem too obvious to mention but evidence suggests that exiting is not always easy, especially after a prolonged period of contact and may be a difficult moment for researcher and participants alike. Further details on using observation to collect data can be found in Chapter 12.

You now need to complete your analysis and to finalise your report. We discuss a range of possible analysis techniques in Chapter 14 but the overall approach is likely to be inductive, taking an emic perspective in order to capture the meanings and understandings of participants. Since much of the data is likely to be observational, ethnographic analysis may be particularly demanding. Here is Geertz’s description of the challenge:

‘Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written in… transient examples of shaped behaviour.’

Geertz (1975: 10)

When planning an ethnographic study, do not underestimate the time required for analysing your data. The final outcome of your analysis should provide what Creswell (2009: 72) describes as ‘a holistic cultural portrait’ of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research in practice 1 gives an example of an ethnographic study.

Research in practice 1 – Example ethnographic study

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>An ethnography of subcultures of consumption</th>
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<td>In their ethnographic study of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) sought to understand the phenomenon of subcultures of consumption from the perspective of consumer behaviour. Over the three years of the research, the authors report moving from being outsiders to becoming insiders, ‘deeply immersed in the lifestyle of the HDSC [Harley-Davidson-oriented subculture of consumption]’ while ‘making a conscious effort to maintain scholarly distance’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 44). Sampling involved multiple research sites, including</td>
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motorcycle rallies, club meetings, and bikers’ homes, and multiple sources of data, including formal and informal interviews, participant and non-participant observation, photographs and documents such as magazines and newsletters. Sampling developed in response to the researchers’ deepening understanding of the field. Analysis took a coding/thematic approach (see Chapter 14) to develop a conceptual framework that identified four key topics with respect to a subculture of consumption: its social structure, its ethos, the process of self-transformation in becoming a member and the opportunities for ‘symbiotic relationships’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 59) with marketers. In their article, the authors discuss the question of transferability of their findings, arguing that the ‘concept of the subculture of consumption is robust enough to encompass virtually any group of people united by common consumption values and behaviours’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 59).

4 **Strengths and weaknesses of ethnographic study designs**

In many respects ethnography is the archetypal qualitative research design embodying many of the general features of qualitative research that we discussed in Chapter 4. In research projects in which taking an emic perspective, working in depth and in context, and studying things in their natural settings are important, ethnography is likely to be a powerful approach. In addition, the application of ethnographic methods to the online environment demonstrates its continued relevance as a research design in different social contexts. The particular features of ethnography that we have outlined here also suggest some of its other strengths. The use of multiple data sources, for example, can help offset some of the limitations of designs such as interview studies that rely on a single data collection method. Prolonged observation may also overcome some of the limitations of research designs that involve only very brief engagement with the research site and the research participants.

Like other research designs, however, ethnography is not without its critics. Gobo (2011) identifies two major issues that ethnographers have to confront. The first is that the methods of ethnography do not live up to an understanding of how ‘good’ research should be done by those advocating a positivist approach to research. The second issue is the extent to which the findings of ethnographic research are generalisable to other settings. It can be argued, however, that these criticisms apply inappropriate quality criteria to research that is motivated by very different underlying assumptions than those that inform much quantitative, deductive research. Alternative criteria such as those proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and discussed in Chapter 4 are likely to be more relevant to an ethnographic study.
Ethnographic researchers face other, practical, challenges. Gaining and maintaining access is clearly one. The time required to carry out a prolonged field investigation is another and may preclude an ethnographic research design in some situations. Ethnography is potentially a demanding form of research in terms of the skills and attributes required of the researcher. There may also be particular ethical concerns when doing ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Using observation raises potential problems in ensuring the informed consent of participants. Even when the observation is not covert, it may be practically impossible to ensure that everyone is briefed and gives formal consent. The boundary between what is private and what is public may also not be as clear in an observational study as it is in some other research designs. These are also areas of concern in online ethnography, where the extent to which you should declare your intentions and interest to members of the online community under study has been debated. We discuss these complex issues in more detail in Chapter 8; we raise them here to emphasise the potential ethical complexities that an ethnographic study may generate.

The characteristics of ethnography, particularly the time required, may restrict its application in business contexts where time is at a premium. Despite this, we have covered ethnography in some detail because we believe that it is of fundamental importance in gaining a general understanding of qualitative research design. Moreover, while a full ethnographic study may be impractical, there is often opportunity to make use of observational data collection methods as part of other research designs, such as the case study or a mixed method design.

5 References


